

A Life Course Perspective: Clarifying the Framework

1

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2

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What Life Course Is ... and Isn't

3

- **Is a theory, perspective, framework**
- **Not a model**
- **No single, definitive text**
- **Reflects a convergence of ideas, informed by multiple sources**

What Life Course Is ... and Isn't

4

- Life Course is a theory or perspective that seeks to ***understand, explain, and improve*** health and disease patterns across population groups.

Key Questions

5

Life Course literature focuses on 2 key Questions:

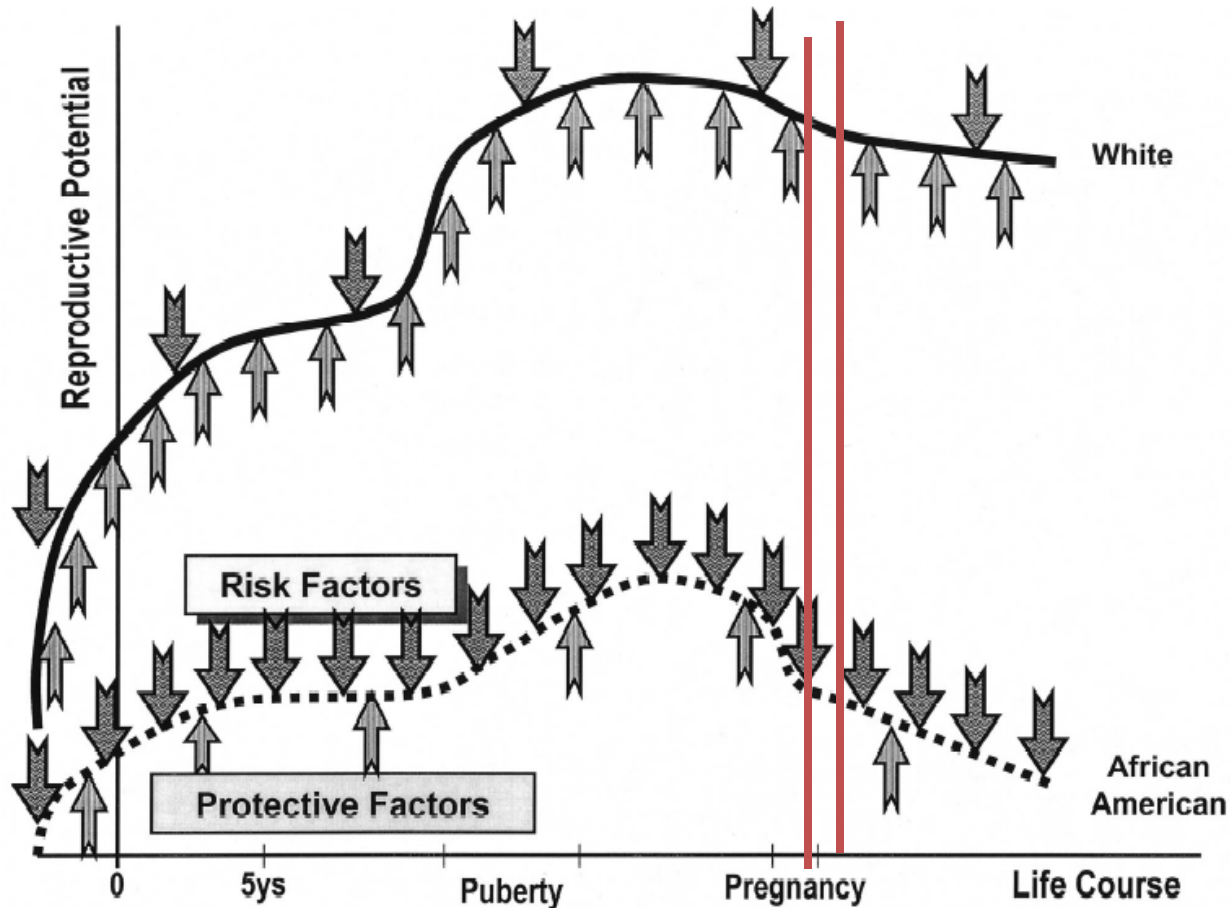
- **Why do health disparities exist and persist across population groups?**
- **What are the factors that influence the capacity of individuals or populations to reach their full potential for health and well-being?**

Key Terms

6

- **Pathways and Trajectories**
- **Early Programming**
- **Risk and Protective Factors**
- **Cumulative Impact**
- **Critical or Sensitive Periods**

Life Course Perspective



Lu MC, Halfon N. Racial and ethnic disparities in birth outcomes: a life-course perspective. *Maternal Child Health J.* 2003; 7: 13-30.

Life Course Core Concepts

8

- Today's experiences and exposures determine tomorrow's health .
- Health trajectories are particularly affected during critical or sensitive periods .
- The broader environment –biologic, physical, and social –strongly affects the capacity to be healthy.
- Inequality in health reflects more than genetics and personal choice.

Fine, Kotelchuck, Adness, Pies 2009

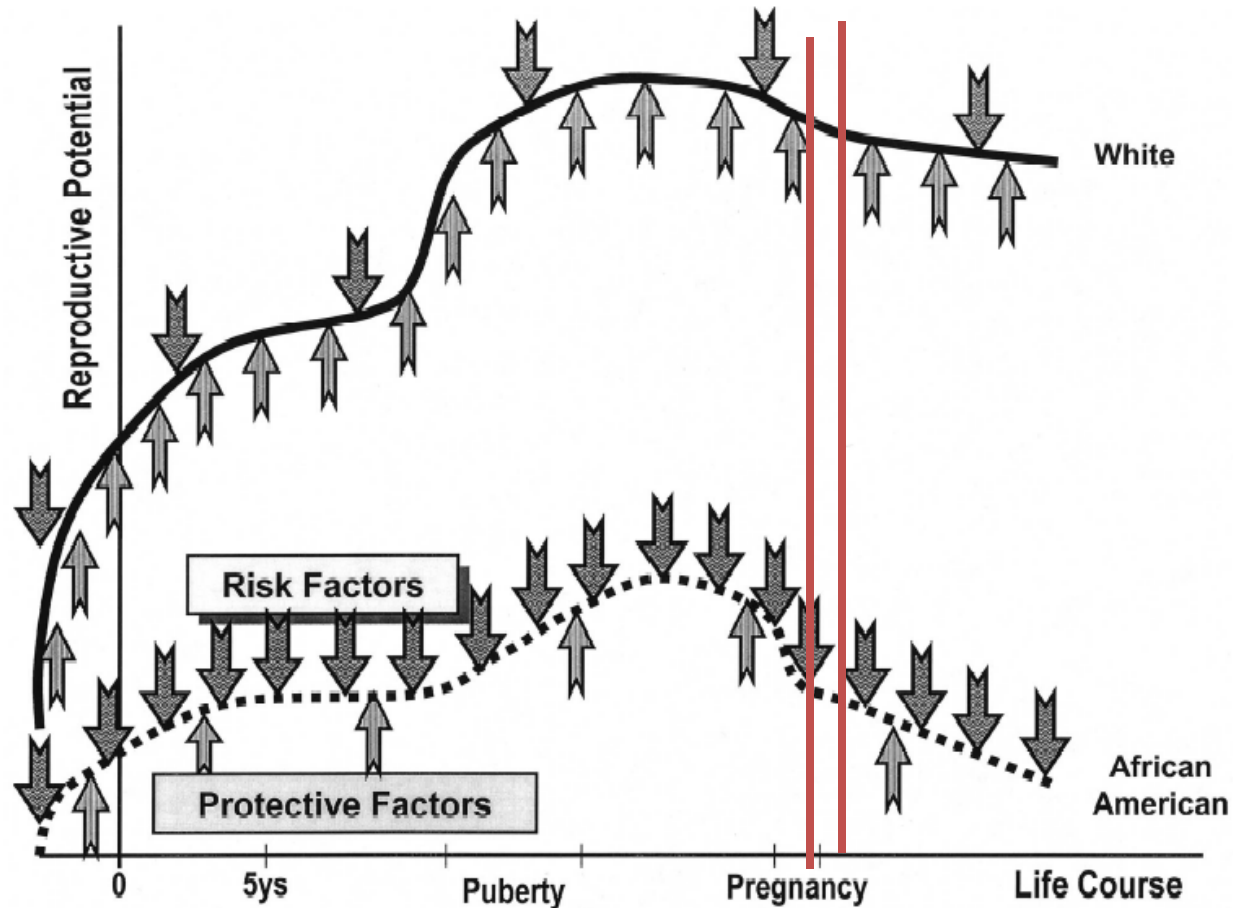
T2E2: The Real “Cliff Notes”

9

- ***Timeline*** – health is cumulative and longitudinal, i.e., developed over a lifetime.
- ***Timing*** - health and health trajectories are particularly affected during critical/sensitive periods.
- ***Environment*** – the broader environment (biologic, social, physical, economic) affects health and development.
- ***Equity*** – health inequality reflects more than genetics and personal choice.

Fine and Kotelchuck, 2010

T2E2 - Graphic



Lu MC, Halfon N. Racial and ethnic disparities in birth outcomes: a life-course perspective. *Maternal Child Health J.* 2003; 7: 13-30.

Is Life Course Old or New?

11

The same science is also informing other fields:

- Barker Hypothesis – links LBW to increased risk of heart disease, diabetes
- Felitti's ACE Study – links early childhood adverse events to increased risk of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, depression
- Neurons to Neighborhoods, NAS – early environments, nurturing relationships, parents are the “active ingredients” in healthy brain development – from the earliest ages forward.
- Lu/Halfon – link disparities in birth outcomes to differential developmental trajectories of the mother, based on early life experiences (programming) and cumulative stress.
- Epi-genetics – links environmental triggers to gene expression.

Kotelchuck, 2010

Additions to Life Course Perspective

12

- **Interactive processes** – The development of health over a lifetime is an interactive process, combining genes, environments and behaviors.
- **Lifelong development/lifelong intervention** – Throughout life and at all stages, even for those whose trajectories seem limited, risk factors can be reduced and protective factors enhanced, to improve current and subsequent health and well-being.

Fine and Kotelchuck, 2010

What we have learned from the Life Course Perspective

13

- **Interventions that reduce risks and increase protective factors can change the health trajectory of individuals and populations.**

How this relates to what you will hear today

14

- The work ahead of you for today is to think about how the Life Course Perspective links with preconception care and early childhood:
 - in your field and with regard to childhood obesity
 - in your training programs, and
 - in relation to others working to improve the health of women, children and families.

Take Home Message

15

Life Course is a framework that reflects new & renewed understandings of ...

- the interplay of genes, environment, and personal choices;
 - the importance of earliest experiences, and subsequent critical and sensitive periods of development;
 - the cumulative, and longitudinal nature of risks and protective factors ;
- ...and how these impact the health and development of individuals and populations.***

Life Course “Cliff Notes”

16

For more information:

CityMatCH Life Course Toolbox Website

www.citymatch.org

Maternal and Child Health Bureau website

www.mchb.hrsa.org

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